

# Growing Idaho wine country beckons with close proximity to Utah

By KATHY STEPHENSON | *The Salt Lake Tribune* | September 8, 2015



*The epicenter of the Idaho wine industry is about 30 miles southwest of Boise. The area, known as the Sunny Slope, overlooks a fertile valley — once an ancient lake — and is imprinted by the winding Snake River. Courtesy | Idaho Wine Commission*

Idaho vineyards » Fertile valley southwest of Boise offers plenty of variety — and varietals — for Utahns looking for a Napa-style experience closer to home.

A trip to wine country is closer than you think.

Instead of heading west to California and its famed winemaking regions in Napa and Sonoma, go north to Idaho, where there are more than just potatoes.

There are 51 wineries throughout the Gem State, but the epicenter of the industry is about 30 miles southwest of Boise. The area known as the Sunny Slope overlooks a fertile valley — once an ancient lake — and is imprinted by the winding Snake River.

“The region is making some phenomenal wines,” says Moya Shatz Dolsby, executive director of the Idaho Wine Commission. “We get a lot of travelers from Salt Lake making their way to the area, since it is the closest wine region.”

More than a dozen wineries are in the southwest region, so a weekend of touring and tasting is possible, said Dolsby.

Several wineries also have tasting rooms in downtown Boise. One of those is Snake River Winery, owned by winemaker Scott DeSeelhorst, a Utah native who still spends part of the year in Salt Lake City and whose family previously owned Solitude Mountain Resort.

Idaho’s wine industry has come a long way since 1975, when the Symms family started making wine in Emmett. The operation quickly evolved into the Ste. Chapelle Winery — named after La Sainte Chapelle in Paris and built by King Louis IX — which will celebrate its 40th anniversary on Saturday.

Today, Ste. Chapelle is the leading winery in Idaho in production and sales volume, producing about 130,000 cases per year, said winemaker Maurine Johnson, an Idaho native who has been at Ste. Chapelle for 18 years. After graduating from Utah State University, she took a job as an entry-level lab assistant. “I learned wine on the job,” she said. “I didn’t even drink wine when I first got hired.”

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Back then, she said, Ste. Chapelle made only a few wines, with most grapes coming from Washington state. Today, the winery produces more than a dozen wines — from chardonnay and riesling to tempranillo and cabernet — and all the grapes are grown within 30 miles of the winery, now in Caldwell.

Just as Ste. Chapelle has grown, so has the Idaho wine industry, Johnson said. “We’re no longer up-and-coming. We’re here.”

Driving to Idaho is the best way to sample the small winery offerings, as the Utah state liquor stores carry a limited number of Idaho wines. Most stores have the chardonnay, merlot, reisling and Huckleberry Red produced by Ste. Chapelle. The state also carries Snake River’s cabernet sauvignon. Other Idaho wines, from Cinder, Hat Ranch, Hutson, Koenig and Williamson wineries are available through special order. Under Utah state law, travelers will have to consume any Idaho wine they buy before heading home, as it is illegal to bring alcoholic products in any amount into Utah, said DABC spokeswoman Vickie Ashby. (The one exception: A person coming from a foreign country who clears U.S. customs can bring in two liters of liquor for personal consumption.)

Thirsty for more? Here are a few more Idaho wine facts:

**Regions** • Idaho has three wine regions: The northern region in the panhandle stretches from Moscow to Sandpoint; the southeast region encompasses Sun Valley and the area from Twin Falls to Mountain Home; and the southwest region, which follows the Snake River near Boise, has the state’s highest concentration of wineries.

**Growth** • The number of Idaho wineries has doubled in the past decade from 25 in 2005. Of course, that number pales when compared to California, with 3,600 wineries, or Washington, with 690. But several of the Idaho winemakers have come from those regions, finding the state’s land more affordable and water more accessible, said Dolsby.

**Harvest** • In 2014, Idaho harvested 2,800 tons of grapes. The state’s leading varietals are chardonnay, riesling and viognier (white); and cabernet sauvignon, syrah, merlot, malbec and tempranillo (red).

**Terroir** • Idaho’s first American Viticulture Area or AVA was approved in the Snake River Valley in 2007 and encompasses more than 8,000 square miles. Climate conditions are similar to AVAs in the Columbia Valley or Washington State and the elevations (1,500 to 3,000 feet) and latitude (43 parallel) are similar to the famed Rioja region in Spain.

**History** • Wine grapes were first planted in Idaho in Lewiston in the 1860s. Winemakers did well until Prohibition, when all production came to a halt. The national ban on liquor was lifted in 1933, but it would take another four decades before modern grapes were planted again in Idaho.

